

4
HOW DO WE STAND TO=DAY?

A. SPEECH DELIVERED BY

The Right Hon. H. H. ASQUITH,

Prime Minister,

IN THE

HOUSE OF COMMONS,

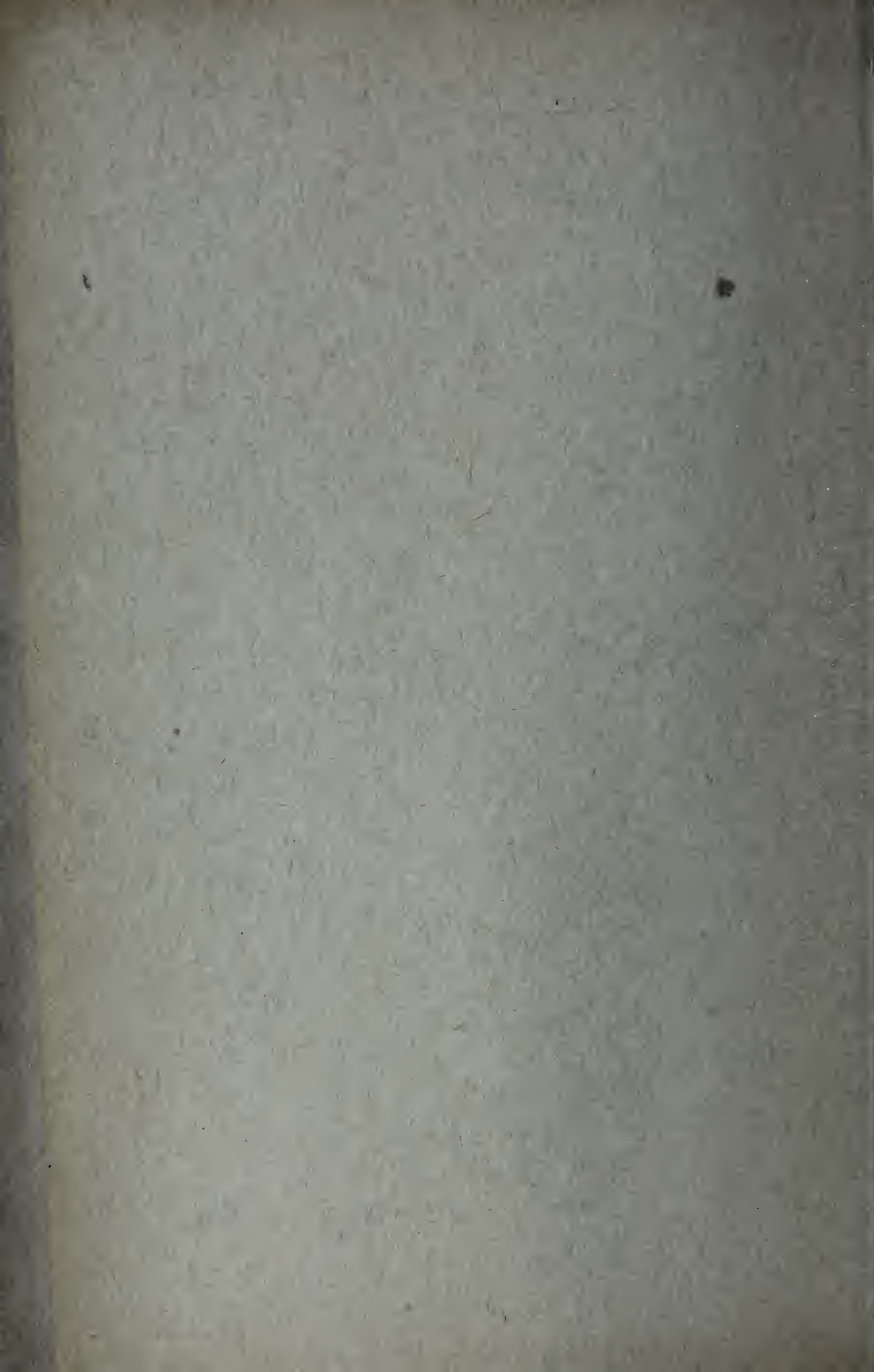
ON THE

2nd November, 1915.

(Published by Authority.)

T. FISHER UNWIN, Ltd.,
1, Adelphi Terrace, London.

Price **1d.**



HOW DO WE STAND TO-DAY?

A SPEECH DELIVERED BY

The Right Hon. H. H. ASQUITH,

Prime Minister,

IN THE

HOUSE OF COMMONS,

ON THE

2nd November, 1915.

(Published by Authority.)

T. FISHER UNWIN, Ltd.,
1, Adelphi Terrace, London.

Price **1d.**



HOW DO WE STAND TO=DAY ?

A SPEECH DELIVERED BY

The Right Hon. H. H. ASQUITH,

Prime Minister,

IN THE

HOUSE OF COMMONS,

ON THE

2nd November, 1915.

I am sure, Sir, the House will not desire to proceed with its ordinary business without expressing, as I venture to do in the name of the whole House, our regret at the unfortunate mishap which our King has sustained. [HON. MEMBERS : "Hear, hear !"] I am glad to say that His Majesty is now once more upon British soil. He is going on as well as could possibly be expected. His injuries are not serious, but the occasion is one of which I think we ought to take advantage to express to him once more our admiration at the manner in which he has always discharged the peculiarly responsible duties in these times as Sovereign of this Empire, and our personal affection and respect.

The statement which I am about to make to the House has been delayed in point of time by circumstances which I regret, but which I could not control. The delay has had one consequence—perhaps I ought to call it an advantage—in that it has enabled me to receive from every possible quarter injunctions, counsels, exhortations, and warnings as to what I am and as to what I am not to say. I am afraid I am doomed to disappoint many expectations, but not the least the expectations of those of my many advisers who seem to think that it is my duty to appear here to-day in the guise either of a criminal in the dock—making the best defence he can for a somewhat doubtful past, or even of a white-sheeted penitent—with a couple of candles, one in each hand, doing penance and asking for absolution. I do not propose to adopt either the one attitude or the other. I am going to speak to the House to-day as the head of the Government, and in that capacity to describe, as far as possible, our actual and prospective situation to a nation which, as I believe, is as determined to-day as it has ever been to prosecute this War to a successful issue, and which trusts the Government, however—and by whomsoever that Government may be composed—to use every means

and to exhaust, if need be, every resource in the attainment of our common and supreme purpose.

It is true that to-day some parts of the horizon are overcast. This War, like all the great wars of history, has been fruitful in surprises and disappointments to all the combatants engaged. For us here in this country it seems to me at this moment to call in an exceptional degree for three things—a proper sense of perspective, a limitless stock of patience, and an overflowing reservoir of both active and passive courage. I do not think our people as a whole—I need not pay the compliment of more than passing notice to the small coterie of professional whimperers who keep our enemies supplied with a daily diet of false hopes—show any lack, or any falling off, in any of these qualities. All they desire, as far as I can discern and appreciate their minds, is to be told, to the extent which diplomatic and military exigencies permit, how our cause stands, and to be assured that in the maintenance and the defence of that cause, we, as a Government and as a people, are playing a worthy part. The wish for the fullest possible information is natural and is most legitimate; nor can there be possibly any greater mistake than to suppose that the Government has

any interest of any kind in concealing anything that is known to themselves, subject to the one overruling condition that its disclosure does not assist the enemy.

TOTAL BRITISH FORCES ENGAGED.

How do we stand to-day? When we began the War, in August of last year, we were prepared to send abroad, and without hitch or delay we sent abroad in August and the early part of September, six Infantry and two Cavalry divisions. In the operations which are described by Sir John French in the despatch that is published to-day—in those operations of the last week of September and the early part of October of the present year—he had under his command not far short of 1,000,000 men. To these, of course, must be added troops employed in the Dardanelles, in Egypt, and in the other theatres of war, as well as our reserves and our garrisons for the defence of the United Kingdom and of the outlying parts of the Empire. How has this gigantic Force been got together by a nation which has never aspired to be a military power, whose main reliance both for defence and, if need be, and should occasion arise, for aggression, has always been upon its Navy—how has it been

composed? First and foremost, of course, of the manhood of this United Kingdom. In the course of the last fifteen months—I leave for the moment the Navy out of account—we have recruited for the purposes of the Army, Regular and Territorial, an enormous number—I do not like for the moment to give the precise figures—an unprecedented number of men. The contribution of India is splendid and well known.

There are one or two figures I should like to give to the House, and through the House to the country and the Empire, which show the assistance that we have received from the Dominions of the Crown. Canada has contributed 96,000 officers and men to the Expeditionary Force. Australia has sent 92,000. New Zealand has sent 25,000. South Africa, having completed the reduction, after a most successful and brilliant campaign, of German South West Africa, has supplied important contingents for service in East and Central Africa, and, in addition, has furnished 6,500 men for service in Europe. Newfoundland has sent 1,600 men, in addition to her substantial contributions to the Royal Navy. The West Indies have supplied 2,000, and contingents have been provided by Ceylon and Fiji. In these figures, remarkable and

significant as they are, I have included only the Forces furnished in the shape of complete units. No account is taken in these figures of the preparation made for the maintenance of these units in the field—the future expansion of contingents already supplied—nor of the very large number of men from all parts of our Empire who have made their own way to the United Kingdom and engaged themselves here. I should add, to complete that aspect of the story, that in Rhodesia, East Africa, and the West African Colonies, important additions to the existing local Forces have been placed in the field, whilst in the other Colonies and Dependencies more remote from active military operations, all defensive organisations have received a profound stimulus.

WORK OF GRAND FLEET.

I have said nothing, so far, of the Navy, but let me add, while I am dealing with our military Forces—for I am certain it will interest the House, and the whole Empire—an account of the service which the Navy has rendered in the transport of our troops. Since the War began, the Transport Department of the Admiralty, for the Army alone, have carried 2,500,000 officers and men, and

320,000 sick and wounded and nurses. They have carried, further, 2,500,000 tons of stores and munitions, and 800,000 horses, mules and camels. These operations have involved thousands of voyages through seas which, at one time—though happily that time has now long since past—were subject to the raids of German cruisers, and which even now, to some extent, though I believe a rapidly diminishing extent, are infested by submarines. Up to the present—and I think this is a most remarkable fact—the loss of life in the whole of these gigantic oversea operations has been considerably less than one-tenth per cent. I do not believe that anywhere in the history of the world any nation, under any conditions, can produce such a comparable record. Of course, these figures, as the House will understand, are exclusive of millions of tons of stores, mainly coal and oil, which have been carried for the Navy and for Allied Governments.

I said for the moment I would leave the actual service of the Navy itself out of the account. But has there ever been anything comparable to it in history? There they are, our men of the Grand Fleet, living—as I told them when I had the honour, a couple of months ago, of addressing them

myself—in those dim and distant spaces, in the twilight, as far as public observation is concerned, unnoticed, unadvertised, performing with an efficiency and a vigilance that it is impossible to describe, or even to appreciate, service to the whole Empire, which makes not only us here absolutely secure against invasion, but which has cleared the whole high seas from one end of the globe to the other of the cruisers of our enemies, and of the whole of the German mercantile marine.

GERMAN FLEET.

Where is that great Fleet, on which so much thought, so much science, and so much money was expended, which was to be a perpetual menace to us here in the United Kingdom? Locked up in the Baltic, it dare not show its face upon any sea where it can be met and dealt with; and the whole effective maritime military resources of Germany upon the seas, after fifteen months of war, are reduced to the sporadic and constantly diminishing efforts of a few furtive submarines, which have sent to the bottom far more innocent, unoffending civilians than any armed enemies. I think figures such as these are more eloquent than columns of rhetoric, and I can conceive no better medicine for

people, if there be such, outside a few very small and selected areas in this country, who attempt to be downhearted and doubtful that the Empire is playing its part in the greatest struggle in history.

WHAT WE ARE DOING.

I am not going to apologise, or to assume an attitude of excuse or defence either for the people of this Empire, who have borne their part so magnificently, or for the Government of this country, which from the beginning of the War up to this moment has, to the best of its ability—I doubt not with many shortcomings and mistakes—and, I believe, with the confidence of the great mass of our fellow-countrymen, controlled and organised and directed this great effort. Having said something of the Forces which we have brought into being, and the debt we owe to our fellow-citizens all over the Empire, I pass to the very important and relevant question, What are we doing with all this vast apparatus of destruction and defence? I will say nothing, or hardly anything of the Western theatre of war, which for the last year has absorbed by far the larger part of our Army. Our total casualties in France and Flanders up to the present moment, or at any rate up to a

week ago, were 377,000 men—that is to say, considerably more than twice the total number of the Expeditionary Force which was dispatched in August and September of last year, though, happily, the very large percentage of the recoveries from wounds makes the net permanent wastage on a much smaller scale. Sir John French's dispatch, published to-day, described the latest achievements of his gallant Army. For the moment, so far as that sphere of war is concerned, I have nothing to add on the part of the Government, except that, so far as I know, in this Western theatre the Germans have not, on balance, gained one foot of ground since April of the present year. Indeed, that is, I believe, a very great understatement of the case.

MESOPOTAMIA.

I turn for the moment to the Eastern theatre. Though I am going to deal exclusively or mainly with the rôle played by our own troops, I cannot pass to that theatre without pointing out to the House the supreme fighting qualities of the Russian soldier, which have never been more splendidly or more conspicuously manifested than during the recent retreat, and assuring our great Ally there, that we here in this country have the greatest

confidence in his capacity, ultimately, and before long, to roll back the tide of invasion, and to reverse the past. But, as I have said, I am concerned to-day and for the moment with the doings of our own Forces in that quarter of the War. First, I would like to say two or three words on an important and a highly successful campaign, which has not, I think, attracted the attention it deserves, namely, the proceedings of our troops in Mesopotamia. The object of sending a Force, which originally consisted of only one division—the 6th—in the autumn of last year, to Mesopotamia was to secure the neutrality of the Arabs, to safeguard our interests in the Persian Gulf, to protect the oil-fields, and generally to maintain the authority of our flag in the East. The history of what has taken place since can be very easily summarised.

In November last General Sir Arthur Barrett, with the 16th and 18th Brigades of the 6th Division, after a pitched battle with the Turks, occupied Basra. In January a further advance was made, which resulted in the capture of Kurna, which, as the House probably knows, is at the junction of the Tigris and the Euphrates. Two or three months later, in April, a second division was added to the Force. The command was assumed

by General Sir John Nixon. After a brilliant series of land and river operations the Turks were driven back, both on the Upper Euphrates and the Tigris. In July the final positions on both rivers were captured with heavy casualties to the enemy, and General Nixon's Force is now within measurable distance of Bagdad. I do not think that in the whole course of the War there has been a series of operations more carefully contrived, more brilliantly conducted, and with a better prospect of final success.

DARDANELLES.

I come now to what is not so unchequered a chapter, the story of our operations in the Eastern theatre of war—I mean those which have gone on in the Dardanelles. During the first few months of the War we were still at peace with Turkey; but owing to causes which are now well known, and to which I need not go back, a state of war between ourselves and the Turkish Empire came into existence in the first week of November, 1914. From that moment it was no longer possible, either from a strategic or from a political point of view, to concentrate our entire energy on the Western theatre. The Turks threatened our Allies the Russians in the Caucasus. They

threatened, not directly, but remotely and indirectly, our position in Egypt. They were able to close the Black Sea, and, in consequence of that, to cut off our source of supply of Russian wheat from Russian ports. The advent of Turkey as an ally of Germany and Austria produced a great, and in some respects a lasting effect upon the attitude of the Balkan States. When that condition of things was brought about, the Government had to face a question which was not merely strategic. And I will venture to say here, because it applies to a great many other operations, past, present and future, that in a great War like this you cannot determine your policy or your course of action entirely and exclusively by military and naval considerations. There are other items that come in. It is the duty of the Government very largely to rely upon the advice of its military and naval advisers, but in the long run the Government, any Government which is worthy of the name, which is adequate to the discharge of the trust which the nation has reposed in it, must bring all these things into some kind of proportion one to the other. Sometimes it is necessary—not only expedient, but necessary—to run risks and encounter dangers which purely naval or military

policy would warn them against. We must take all those things into account.

Now with regard to this matter. From the first moment that a state of war began to exist between Turkey and ourselves in November last year, we had to consider in consultation with our naval and military advisers, what was the best and most politic course for us to take, either aggressively or defensively, in that part of the globe. In January we had not sufficient military forces available—having regard to the requirements of the Western theatre—for service in the East, to do more than provide for local defence in Egypt against the impending Turkish attack, which was delivered and utterly defeated on the 2nd of February. The Government had then brought under their notice the possibility of naval attack in the Dardanelles. After full investigation and consultation with the naval experts, including the Admiral commanding in that part of the *Ægean*, and notwithstanding—I am betraying no secret in saying this—some doubts and hesitations, which undoubtedly there were in the mind of our principal naval adviser at that time, Lord Fisher, the Government felt justified in sanctioning the attack. People who think and say that that attack was initiated

without due consideration, without a full review of all its naval possibilities, are entirely mistaken. It was most carefully considered. It was developed in consultation between the Admiral on the spot and the War Staff of the Admiralty here, and before any final decision was taken it was communicated to the French Admiralty, who entirely approved of it, and agreed to take part in it, and it was—I am not using too strong a word—enthusiastically received and acclaimed by the illustrious Grand Duke, who then commanded the Russian Armies, and who rightly thought that it would assist his operations in the Caucasus.

The matter was carefully reviewed over and over again by the War Council, and in answer to a question which was put to me to which I promised to reply, I may say that all the operations so contrived before a shot was fired, or any actual steps taken, were communicated to and approved by the Cabinet. In the circumstances of the case in which we then stood, the operation conceived was a purely naval operation. We could not afford at that time—Lord Kitchener said, and we all agreed—any substantial military support. It was, therefore, decided to make the attempt with the naval

forces alone. I take my full share of the responsibility for the initiation of that operation—my full share. I deprecate more than I can say the attempt to allocate responsibility to one Minister or another, or to suggest that in a matter of this kind some undefined personality, of great authority and over-mastering will, controlled and directed the strategy of the operations. That is not the case. If anybody is responsible for the initiation of this enterprise in the Dardanelles, nobody is more responsible than I. I thought then, as everybody must have thought who knew the whole circumstances, and surveyed the whole situation, that we ran great risks, but, on the other hand, we had very great, and in the prosecution of the War, capital objects then in view—to influence the whole Balkan situation in a sense favourable to the Allies, open communications with the Black Sea and relieve what was then a very pressing necessity in this country—the necessity for a fuller and freer influx of wheat and other supplies—and, if we could, strike a blow at the very heart of the Turkish Empire.

As I have said, in its first conception and initiation this was a purely naval affair. The naval attack took place towards the end of February, and

the outer forts gave way and were completely subjected. Those naval operations were continued systematically for a month. They culminated in the attack on the Narrows on the 18th of March, which resulted in a set-back and the loss of or damage to several important naval units. We had then to consider whether, and to what extent, this operation should be continued, and it was the opinion of those who advised us—and looking back on the past to bring myself again to resurvey the situation, it seems to me that, if not a sound, at any rate it was a very tenable opinion—that by the aid of an adequate military force the attack might still be driven home with success. Sir Ian Hamilton was selected to command the expedition. He left London early in March, and was present at the naval attack on the 18th March ; and a few days later, after consultation with the Vice-Admiral on the spot, he reported to us that they were in agreement that a joint naval and military attack was necessary. The actual plan of operations was left, as I think it ought to be, to the judgment of the commanders on the spot, though, so far as I know, there was never any disagreement between them and the opinion of the General Staff here at home.

I will not go into the intermediate stages of the operation until we come to the beginning of

August. We had then assembled at the Dardanelles a very large naval and military force. The actual operations which took place have been described, and are familiar to the House and to the public. I will not attempt at this moment—it would be quite irrelevant to my purpose—to attach either praise or blame to this man or that, or to this unit or that; but I will say this for myself, that, in the whole course of the War, with its ups and downs, I have never sustained a keener disappointment than in the failure of this operation. The chances of success, as it seemed to us and to those on the spot, were not only great, but preponderant. The consequences of success, if success had been attained, were almost immeasurable. It would have solved the whole situation in the Balkans; it would have prevented the possibility of that which unhappily now is the realised fact, the adhesion of Bulgaria to our opponents; it would have laid the capital of the Turkish Empire open to menace and possibly to capture; and, throughout the whole of the Eastern world, it would have been acclaimed as the most brilliant and conclusive demonstration of the superiority of the Allies. We did not succeed, notwithstanding the magnificent exhibitions, never surpassed, of gallantry and of resource.

on the part of our troops, and by none more conspicuously than on the part of our Australian troops.

Nor ought the House to forget the extraordinary and magnificent service rendered throughout these operations by the whole of the Royal Navy. Nothing has been more conspicuous than the service of our submarines. Let me just mention this fact, a most significant and most encouraging fact, as showing how the old spirit of the British Navy—its adventure, its gallantry, its resource—pervades those who have to manipulate these strange modern machines, just as much as it did those who served under Blake, or Hood, or Nelson. After the 26th of last month, British submarines operating against enemy vessels in the Sea of Marmora have succeeded in sinking or damaging two battleships, five gunboats, one torpedo boat, eight transports, and no less than 197 supply ships of all kinds, whether steamers or sailing vessels. That is a wonderful chapter in the history of the British Navy. The arrival of German submarines took place in May, and, of course, added an enormous danger to the situation. The Navy showed themselves quite equal to it. Safe harbours were selected and prepared where ships

could remain securely. Small craft were assembled in great numbers to maintain the communications of the Army, and, finally, a number of specially constructed vessels, largely due to the inventive genius of Lord Fisher himself, which had been built by the Admiralty in anticipation of such requirements as this, went out to the Mediterranean, and have done, from that day to this, most magnificent work. The Navy throughout this campaign has risen superior to all difficulties, and has been able to maintain the communications of the Army intact. But, as I have said, the result of the series of attacks made in August has been disappointing. I admit that to the full. I am telling the House the whole truth about this matter, because I think the country ought to know it.

But when you come to form a judgment—I think it is premature yet to do it—of whether this attack on the Dardanelles was an operation which ought to have been undertaken, you must consider what would have happened if it had not been undertaken. It is at least probable that the Russians, who were then already beginning to retreat before the Germans in Poland, might have had a serious setback in the Caucasus. In all probability, a great attack by the Turks might have

been organised against us in Egypt. The Mesopotamia Expedition, of which I have spoken, might have been swept out of existence, and Bulgaria would almost certainly have allied herself with the Central Powers months before the time when she actually did. . And during the whole of this time, and up to the present moment, do not forget that our Force on the Gallipoli Peninsula has held up, and is holding up, a force of something like 200,000 Turks, and preventing them from doing incalculable mischief in other parts of the Eastern theatre. I am not, on behalf of the Government, going to say more as regards the future of this particular sphere of the theatre of War, because I think, as I said a moment ago, it is too soon to pronounce a final judgment. The situation at the Dardanelles is receiving, I need not say, our most careful and anxious consideration, not as an isolated thing, but as part and parcel of a far larger strategic question which is raised by the whole of the recent developments in the Eastern theatre of War.

BALKAN SITUATION.

I will say a few words and they shall be very few, because they must be very carefully chosen, on the position in the Balkans. Ever since the

beginning of the War, and especially since Turkey entered into it, we—and by “we” I mean not only ourselves, but the Allied Powers, who have always acted together—have not ceased or slackened in our efforts to promote united action among the Balkan States and Roumania. The efforts of diplomacy ever since August and September last in that direction have been ceaseless and untiring. The result—I again make this admission—as far as the promotion of Balkan unity is concerned, has been disappointment and failure, and it is not surprising, perhaps, that there are critics who think that by greater firmness at one point, and by greater adroitness at another, more successful gains might have been made. If I might, for a moment, say a word to those critics, there are two or three points which are often left out of account, and which ought to be taken into account when you are dealing with this tangled and thorny chapter in diplomatic history. The first is this, that unity of direction is as important an asset in diplomacy as it is in strategy. Throughout the whole of these proceedings Germany has had that advantage, for Austria has always been a mere cypher and appendix to German diplomacy. But with the Allies, on the other hand, every important step has, naturally and necessarily, been taken in consultation

and in concert between three and, latterly, four different Powers. With the best good will in the world, and with the most genuine common purpose, there must be differences of angles and of points of view in an operation of that kind.

Another point which is equally relevant and important in this particular connection is the mutual animosities—I am not using the word in any censorious sense—of the Balkan States themselves, an unhappy and a still unliquidated legacy of the two Balkan wars, and especially of the Treaty of Bucharest. It is an easy thing, it has been throughout an easy thing, for Germany to make lavish promises to Bulgaria of Serbian and Albanian, and perhaps, secretly, even of Greek territory. But we, the Allies, could not barter away the property of our Allies and friends behind their backs, without their consent, or without an assurance, at any rate, of adequate compensation, which has been a source of infinite complication and controversy. Further, when the Allies are reproached, as they are in some quarters, with being too late in providing active help for Serbia, it must be remembered that up to the very last moment there was the strongest reason to believe that Greece would acknowledge and act upon her

treaty obligations to Serbia. When, on 21st September, after the Bulgarian mobilisation had begun, M. Venezelos, who was then the Prime Minister of Greece, asked France and ourselves for 150,000 men, it was on the express understanding that Greece would also mobilise. Greece did in fact mobilise under his direction on the 24th September, but it was not until the 2nd October that M. Venezelos found himself able to agree to the landing of British and French troops under the formal protest, a merely formal protest, which he had already made to the French Government.

On 4th October—I wish these dates to be borne in mind—M. Venezelos announced what had happened to the Greek Chamber, and at the same time declared that Greece must abide by her Treaty with Serbia. Next day the King repudiated the declaration, and M. Venezelos resigned. The new Government which succeeded declined to recognise that a *casus foederis* had arisen between Greece and Serbia, despite our constant insistence that Greece should make common cause with Serbia, and the new Greek Government, while declaring the desire to remain on friendly terms with the Allies, declined to depart from their attitude of neutrality. Those are facts which

ought to be taken into account by the people who criticise the alleged inertia of the Allied Governments. I make no comment upon that for the moment. I think it is better not to do so. The result is that Serbia, without Greek support, was left to bear the brunt of a frontal invasion by Germany and Austria and a side attack from the King of Bulgaria. I have to say this—and I say it on behalf of the Government and of the people of the United Kingdom—we here in this United Kingdom, and I know it to be also the opinion of our French and our Russian Allies, cannot allow Serbia to become the prey of this sinister and nefarious combination. The General Staffs of the French Army, and of our own, have been in close consultation, consultations which culminated with the very welcome visit to London, at the end of last week, of the illustrious Commander-in-Chief of the French Army, General Joffre. The result, I am glad to say, is complete agreement between us, not only as to the ends, but as to the means. The House will not expect me to, and I ought not to say by what method or in what form, that common policy will be pursued. But this I will say, our co-operation will be close, cordial, and in full concert, and Serbia may be assured, so far as I am able to do so, and I give her that assurance on

the part of the British Government to-day, that her independence is regarded by us as one of the essential objects of the Allied Powers.

ALLIED FINANCE.

I am sorry to have kept the House so long with these matters, but I set forth with the object of telling them everything that I could well do ; and I now proceed to ask myself and to ask them the further question after this review of the various theatres of operation : What are we doing and what ought we to do, in addition to all that we have done, first, as a community, and then as classes and as individuals ? We have, as my right hon. Friend the Minister of Munitions said in a speech in May last—which I trust was widely read—as partners with our great Allies, three special co-ordinate functions to discharge. First of all, there is the supply of men, an adequate supply of men for the Army ; then the provision of the munitions of war, not only for our own troops but for the forces of our Allies ; and thirdly, the burden which we have taken upon ourselves, and which to the utmost of our ability we shall endeavour to discharge—the burden of common allied finance. One of the things which we have to consider is how

we are to co-ordinate and to adjust the different functions, the object being that we here in the United Kingdom and in the British Empire should contribute most fruitfully and most effectively to the common cause. I would say just one word, first of all, as to the third of those points, namely, the question of finance. The financial position to-day is serious. The extent to which we here in this country are buying goods abroad in excess of our exports is more than £30,000,000 per month against an average of about £11,000,000 per month before the War; and, at the same time, we are making advances to our Allies and to others which were estimated by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Budget speech to amount to a total during the current financial year, to say no more of what is to come, to £423,000,000. We have also, be it remembered, alone amongst the belligerent countries, maintained our free market for gold, and, indeed, have exported a large amount to all parts of the world; and it is certain we are making purchases and undertaking commitments to provide credits abroad to an extent that can only be paid for by the further export of gold, or by the further sale abroad of securities and of our own debts.

I only bring these facts, which are familiar, in this context to the recollection of the House, in order to say once more that this is a burden which, rich as we are, resourceful as we are, we cannot go on discharging unless there is, both on the part of the Government as well as on the part of the individuals, the most strict and stringent rule of economy, the avoidance of unnecessary expenditure, and the curtailment of charges which under normal conditions we should think right and necessary, and, if I may use a homely expression, cutting our coat according to the cloth with which we have to make it. I do not think, I am not a pessimist in this matter, our position compares unfavourably with that of the Governments who are opposed to us. The consumption of the German Government and the German nation has been far in excess of what they have been able to produce or import, and their stocks of available commodities are, from all we hear, rapidly diminishing and dwindling. And, further, the standard of life of the greater part of the population of Germany has been depressed to a point at which there is little or no margin of reserve. We in these respects no doubt apparently and ostensibly stand in a better position, but I would once more

say with all the emphasis of which I am capable, we cannot sustain the burden which this great War has laid upon us unless as individuals, as classes, as a community, and as a Government we make, and are prepared to make, far greater sacrifices than we have hitherto done in the direction of retrenchment and economy. There is another point in that connection I should like to mention before I deal with the question of men, and to which for a moment I desire to call the attention of the House, and that is the cost of the Army. The average cost of the Regular Army in peace time, on a very rough and an approximate estimate, used to be reckoned and is reckoned as about £100 per head per annum. I am quite certain that I am using a very moderate and more than moderate figure when I say in the condition which now prevails the complete cost per head of the Army, the vastly increased Army which we are now maintaining, is somewhere between £250 and £300 per head. I do not want to go into details. I purposely said it was an approximate and a very rough estimate. This is a fact which everybody ought to bear in mind.

NATIONAL SERVICE.

I come to the question of men. I lay down myself one very simple proposition, and it is this. Under the conditions in which we are now placed every man in this country, without any distinction of any kind, ought to be doing the thing for which, in view of the purposes of the War, he is best fitted. I make no exception or qualification of any kind. The difficulty, of course, is to find out any system under which you can say what each particular man or class of men should do, and my right hon. Friend the President of the Local Government Board introduced the National Register, of which Parliament approved, with the very object of providing the material upon which a system of that kind might be based. I will go a step further. I am speaking my own views, though I have no reason to think they are seriously dissented from by any of my colleagues, and where in the course of the arguments I think they are I will draw attention to possible points of dissent. My next proposition is this : After you have made, by the best system of examination and classification that you can adopt, adequate provision for all the other necessary national services, amongst which I

need not say I do not merely include the fabrication of munitions, but also the maintenance of industries which are essential to the life of our country, the carrying on of industries that are essential for the production of our exports—when you have made adequate provision for all those national interests, the residuum—not, perhaps, a very happy word to use, I will say the reservoir—which is left of men of military and recruitable age ought to be fully explored and exhausted. Now I approach thornier ground. There have been, and probably are, differences of opinion as to whether that recruitable reservoir can be fully made use of by what is called the voluntary system without resort to some form of compulsion. I will let the House for once into a Cabinet secret. So many things have been said and written of what goes on in the Cabinet, which those of us who sit in the Cabinet have never heard or dreamt of in our lives. But I will let the House into a Cabinet secret—I hope without breaking any obligation of secrecy or any confidence—and that is that there have been differences of opinion amongst the Members of the Cabinet as to whether what we need, whether, in other words, what I call the full exploitation and employment of

the recruitable reservoir, can or cannot be obtained without resort to some form of compulsion. I will state my own view. In the first place, I have no abstract or *à priori* objection of any sort or kind to compulsion—in time of war. I have nothing at the back of my mind which would make me go to the stake, or through some less severe form of penance, in defence of what is called the voluntary principle. I think that in time of war we must get rid of all those predilections both on the one side and on the other. It is a pure question of practical expediency—how are we going to bring the War to a successful conclusion? I will make a further admission—if admission it can be called—that is that I think our system of voluntary recruiting, which does very well, or well enough, under normal conditions in time of peace, operates, as it has been hitherto practised, in a haphazard, capricious, and to some extent unjust way with regard both to individuals and to classes. It is like a net with very irregular meshes. It lets through some things which ought not to be allowed to escape, and it holds and keeps some things which had better be let through.

My objection to the employment of compulsion for the purpose of recruiting the Army under

existing conditions has not been based at all upon abstract attachment to an *à priori* principle, or upon blindness or indifference to the imperfections and defects of our existing methods of voluntary recruiting. It is based upon an entirely different ground, namely, that the employment of compulsion under existing conditions would forfeit what I regard to be of supreme and capital importance, that is, the maintenance of the national unity. That again is an abstract objection, but when translated into concrete terms it means this : if you were to apply, I do not speak of any particular method, but any method of coercion or compulsion, without something in the nature, I will not say of universal, but of general consent, you would defeat your own purpose. It would not be a practicable or workable method of making good and filling up the gaps left by the defects of the voluntary system. I am speaking my own view—entirely my own view. My proposition, if I were to formulate one, would be this : not that I rule out compulsion as an impossible expedient, but that compulsion, if resorted to, ought only to be resorted to, and can only from a practical point of view be resorted to—or, in other words, be made a workable expedient for filling up the gap which

you have to supply—with something in the nature of general consent. I am glad to say that to a large extent these, I hope, are not for the moment practical or relevant considerations. Lord Derby's scheme, the details of which are familiar to the House and to the country—therefore I need not attempt to describe them—is being worked, I believe, with the hearty consent and co-operation even of the most ardent supporters of compulsion, certainly with the goodwill and active co-operation of organised labour, the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee, and all the various agencies in the country which are seeking to supply this great national necessity.

If you ask me how many men ought we to aim at getting under that scheme, or under any scheme, my answer is that you ought to aim at securing everybody of military age and capacity who is left after you have completely supplied the other national necessities to which I have referred. I would much rather state the requirements of the Government and of the nation in those general terms than by reference to any particular set of figures. It covers everything. It covers everybody who remains over and who ought to be made available wherever he may be or whoever he may

be. If you ask me again when I should form a conclusion as to whether the voluntary system, as organised under Lord Derby's scheme, had reached a result which would enable us to say whether it was successful or not—I think he has fixed the 30th November as the date on which he will close the lists—my answer is, as soon after that date as it is possible to classify and arrive at the results which his labours have achieved. Then, and not before then, and not later, can we say whether or not the experiment of voluntary recruiting is a success. I very much deprecate—I hope I shall have here the assent both of those who, like myself, are strong voluntarists and of those who are disposed to favour a system of compulsion—I think it would be much better to leave it like that, and come to a decision when we have arrived at that point of actual experiment, than to lay down hard and fast lines in terms of numbers as to this or that principle.

I believe myself that the result will be wholly satisfactory. I have not the least fear of there being any necessity to resort to anything beyond this great organised effort which is being carried on with the goodwill of all parties in the State and

with the hearty co-operation of the leaders of organised labour. But if, when every just allowance has been made for other necessary work, and the whole of this machinery has been in operation and has achieved what it can, there should still be found a substantial number of men of military age not required for other purposes, who, without excuse, hold back from the service of their country, I believe that the very same conditions which make compulsion impossible now, namely, the absence of general consent, would force the country to the view that they must consent to supplement by some form of legal obligation the failure of the voluntary system. As far as I myself am concerned, I should be prepared to recommend them to take that course. But I dismiss it as a contingency which I do not think is ever likely to arise.

I am determined—I stick at nothing—I am determined that we shall win this War. Sooner than not win the War, if I found—I do not believe I shall—such a situation as that, I should come down without the faintest hesitation or doubt to all my friends, those who like myself are what I call strong supporters of the voluntary system, and say, “We have done what we could ; we have not obtained the results we hoped for ; we must do

what is still necessary by other means." Let me say one word more in this connection. I am told by Lord Derby and others that there is some doubt among married men who are now being asked to enlist, whether, having enlisted, or promised to enlist, they may not be called upon to serve while younger and unmarried men are holding back, and not doing their duty. Let them at once disabuse themselves of that notion. So far as I am concerned I should certainly say the obligation of the married man to serve ought not to be enforced or held to be binding upon him unless and until—I hope by voluntary effort, if it be needed in the last resort, as I have explained, by other means—the unmarried men are dealt with.

I felt bound to deal at some length with that matter—not because I myself have any doubt. I have far too much confidence in the patriotism and public spirit of my fellow-countrymen to doubt for one moment that they are going to respond to that appeal—that the young men, the unmarried men with whom the promise of the future lies, are not going in this great emergency to shirk, and to leave the fortunes of their country and the assertion of the greatest cause for which we have ever fought, to those who have given

greater hostages to fortune and are least able to bear the brunt. I think it is only fair, just, and right to the House of Commons that we should face every contingency.

CABINET CONTROL.

I have detained the House at very great length, but there is one other matter to which I must refer. I have spoken of finance. I have spoken of the provision of men. But I am told there is great anxiety in some quarters as to what is called the higher direction of the War. We have a Cabinet of twenty-two members.

AN HON. MEMBER : Twenty-one !

THE PRIME MINISTER : Twenty-one at the moment, but I wish it were twenty-two. Call it twenty-one, if you please. Some people seem to think that a Cabinet of twenty-one members is incompetent to conduct the affairs of a great Empire in times of emergency like this. [HON. MEMBERS : "Hear, hear."] Mr. Pitt, when he carried on the great war against France more than one hundred years ago, had, I think, a Cabinet of seven or nine, but the exiguity in size of that Cabinet did not prevent him from committing

great blunders, or from suffering from many strokes of ill-fortune. For myself, I do not think there is any numerical specific against either want of foresight or want of good luck. That is a very mechanical way of looking at it. I do not propose to change the size of the Cabinet ; but, of course, there is a great deal to be said in time of war for having one, or it may be more—at any rate one—comparatively small body of men who will deal with the daily exigencies of the State. We realised that—it may be very strange for some of our censors to know it—in the first few weeks of the War. I do not think any Prime Minister has ever, to a greater degree than I have done, delegated work, which in normal conditions is done by the Cabinet as a whole, to Committees and smaller bodies. I did not know it until I was reminded of it the other day, but I believe, from first to last, since the beginning of the War, we have had something like fifty different Committees and advisory bodies, all framed out of the Cabinet, sometimes with material aid from outside, to which special departments of activity, brought into prominence or urgency by the needs of the War, have been relegated—subject always to ultimate Cabinet responsibility.

In particular, we have had since a very early period of the War a body fluctuating in number from time to time, and which has varied in name. Sometimes it has been called a "War Council," sometimes a "War Committee." Sometimes it has gone by other designations. It is a body to which either general questions of State or questions of strategy in particular areas and arenas have, by the consent of the Cabinet, been referred. I have come to the conclusion, after now some fifteen months of experience, that it is desirable to maintain that system, but to limit still further the number of the body to whom what I may call the strategic conduct of the War is from time to time referred. I think, and my colleagues agree with me, that the Committee, or by whatever name it may be called, should be a body of not less than three, and perhaps not more than five in number, but with this important proviso that, whether it be three or five, it should, of course, have power to summon to its deliberation and to its assistance the particular Minister concerned with the particular Departments whose special knowledge is needed, or is desirable, for the determination of each issue as it arises. I think further—and this is rather a delicate question—the relations between any such body and the

Cabinet should be of an elastic kind. At the same time, it should be understood that the Cabinet, which, as a body, has the ultimate responsibility for questions of policy, shall be kept, not only constantly informed of the decisions and actions of the Committee, but in all questions which involve a change, or a new departure in policy, should be consulted before decisive action is taken. It is only on these lines that you can successfully conduct a war like this.

I entirely agree with those who say—and I have had plenty of experience—that it is very undesirable, and leads to delay and often to confusion, that decisions which have to be taken, very often at very short notice, should not become effective until they are referred to the Cabinet as a whole. That is perfectly true. I think a Committee such as I have indicated ought to be clothed with power to take such decisions, and to act upon them. On the other hand, I am very jealous of the maintenance of collective Cabinet responsibility for large changes and new departures in policy; but I believe that in practice it will be found perfectly capable of working the two things together. That is what we propose to do. I hope that before many days are over we may be able to announce to

the House, as I think the House ought to be told, the members who will compose the Committee, whatever the size that we ultimately decide upon. In conjunction with that, but still in connection with the subject of what is called the higher direction of the War, I attach very great importance, first of all to a more complete and intimate co-ordination between the staffs of the various Allied Powers. We have had a very happy illustration of the advantage of that in our recent deliberations with General Joffre. We should also have a more intimate and regular interchange by some form of combination with the staffs, not only of the War Office and the Admiralty, but with those who conduct our diplomatic affairs. It is impossible to carry on these things in watertight compartments. You must have co-ordination of contact—close, constant, practical, continuing. Those are the general outlines. Those are the views I desire to express to the House in regard to our position.

I have this afternoon tried to tell the House the whole truth. I am not aware—I do not think I have kept back anything known to us which ought to be known to the House, unless

it is a thing which, if told, would go for the first time to our enemies. I have made no attempt to conceal anything in the past history of the War—its conduct, its failures—shortcomings, if you like.

PERSONAL POSITION.

If I may, by leave of the House, I should like, before I sit down, to say one or two words with regard to my own personal position. When the War broke out, I was the Head of the Government. I take my share—and no one has a larger share—of responsibility at that supreme moment for the attitude and policy of this country. A terrible responsibility it is, measured by what has happened, and by what is still to happen ! Much of our best blood spilt ! Thousands of young lives, the hope of our future, cut short in the very promise of their youth ! The cry goes up in ever-increasing volume day by day and week by week from torn hearts, from mutilated homes. Every morning, is there throughout the country, in almost every home, one or other of us who does not tremble to think of what message of direct and personal loss may be in store ? We might have stood aloof—spectators and not actors in this the

most moving tragedy in the history of man. We might have stood aloof, but is there one even of those who are enduring unspeakable anguish—childless parents, widowed wives, desolate comrades and friends—is there one who wishes—or even thinks—that Britain should have acted otherwise? I do not believe that there is. Searching, if the House will allow me to say so, the utmost depths of my own heart and conscience, I would not unsay or undo that great decision. I have from that moment to this laboured, with the unceasing and devoted aid of loyal counsellors and colleagues, to uphold the common cause, to bring to its support every resource in man and money, in prudence and courage, in unity and self-sacrifice that this Kingdom and this Empire can provide. That there have been errors and shortcomings, failures of judgment, lack of foresight in the conduct and direction of our policy, I am the first person in the United Kingdom to acknowledge and to deplore. That there has been anything of sloth, indifference, self-complacency, unwillingness to face unpalatable facts, a desire, or even a disposition, to conceal from our fellow-countrymen the truth, I challenge anyone to prove.

I am as confident as I was fifteen months ago that we are going to carry a righteous cause to a triumphant issue ; and I am not going to shift the burden which has been put upon me until I am satisfied that I cannot bear it, or that it can be borne better by others. So long as I enjoy, and I am proud to think that I still do enjoy the confidence of my Sovereign, of the House of Commons, and of the country, I shall not surrender the task, heavy indeed beyond the power of myself, or those of any other man, but as noble and as inspiring as any in history. If there be moments such as come to all of us when we are tempted to be faint-hearted, let us ask ourselves : What year in our history has done more to justify our faith in the manhood and the womanhood of our people ? It has brought us, as we cannot at this moment forget, the imperishable story of the last hours of Edith Cavell facing a worse ordeal than the battlefield—the moments creeping on slowly and remorselessly and death already swallowed up in victory. She has taught the bravest man amongst us a supreme lesson of courage. Yes, Sir, and in this United Kingdom, and throughout the Dominions of the Crown, there are thousands of such women, but a year

ago we did not know it. We have great traditions, but a nation cannot exist by traditions alone. Thank God, we have living examples of all the qualities which have built up and sustained our Empire ! Let us be worthy of them, and endure to the end.
